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# FACING NEW CHALLENGES: REFORMS IN SPAIN'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

*Nick Lynch*



## **Introduction**

The university system in Spain has undergone many changes through a series of laws and government decrees since the ratification of the current Spanish constitution in 1979. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the nation saw booming enrollment in higher education programs. Over the past ten years, the number of Spanish universities has grown from 46 to 66. As the university system has continued to evolve, new challenges have arisen, including struggles to meet the demands of the labor market, limited student mobility, and a system of paternalism and internal promotion among lecturers. Furthermore, Spain's membership in the European Union has imposed additional standards; and with the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the Spanish university system has been forced to adopt various structural changes. A 2001 reform law introduced several measures to meet the new standards as well as to address other growing quality concerns. Criticism of

those initial reforms as well as the recent change in government has opened the door to further changes. Today, additional reforms are on the horizon as the university system continues to evolve.

In this article I will evaluate the current structure of the Spanish public university system. Over twenty years have passed since the 1983 Ley de Reforma Universitaria — Law on University Reform (LRU) — established the initial framework of the current Spanish university system. To meet the challenges of 21st century Spain, there are several structural obstacles that the system must overcome. I will also look at the recent reforms and identify what still needs to be done to improve the quality and efficiency of Spanish public universities.

## **Historical Background**

As noted above, the basis for the current university system in Spain was established by the LRU in 1983. Previously, public universities

were under direct control of the government's Ministry of Education. The LRU marked a major shift in power, as public universities gained autonomy with regard to their internal structure and hiring decisions, enabling them to establish their own programs. Controlling power within the public university was transferred to the *claudio constituyente*, a council comprised of professors and administrators from within the university. This council is headed by the university rector or president. The role of the central government shifted to responsibility for establishing the basic legal framework for regulating the system and the range of official degrees, while regional or autonomous governments became responsible for university development and funding. The controlling socialist government in 1983 carried a slogan of a "university education for everyone." With the increased focus upon higher education, there also came increased government funding for the public institutions. This funding helped to offset much of tuition costs, opening the doors of higher education to a larger number of Spaniards. Greater access led to rapid growth in the student population as well as in the number of universities.

By the late 1980s, Spain had the second highest percentage of the population in Western Europe enrolled in universities; yet spending per student was only around a third of the Western European average. ("Higher Education") At the same time, the children of the Spanish "baby boom," which occurred much later in Spain than in other countries, had reached the university level. With the growing enrollment, severe overcrowding developed. In an effort to ease the burden on public universities, a 1991 government decree established the basis for expanding private universities. At the time of the 1991 decree, only four private universities existed, accounting for fewer than three percent of all university students. Yet despite the increase in the number of private institutions over the next few years, public universities still dominate the market. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the demographic pressures on university enrollment imposed by the baby boom generation have subsided and the growth of the number of universities has leveled off. In 2002, there were a total of 66 uni-

versities, with 48 public institutions accounting for over 90 percent of students. (Chislett, p. 55)

## Current Structure of the University System

At age 16 compulsory education in Spain ends, and students have the option to sign up for vocational courses or stay in school for an additional two years to obtain the *título de bachillerato* or senior schooling certificate. This certificate is required of all students to sit for the national university selection exam, *prueba de aptitud para a la uiversidad*, also referred to as the *selectividad*. Approximately eight out of every ten students who take the exam are accepted into a university. (Chislett, p. 53) However, performance on the exam dictates the course of study a student may pursue. For admission into more advanced programs, such as medicine, law, and engineering, students must score higher on the *selectividad*.

At the university level, there are three stages of study. The first stage, referred to as "short-cycle" courses, typically lasts three years and will lead to the equivalent of an associate's degree. The second stage, "long-cycle" courses, includes the first cycle plus an additional 2–3 years of study and yields a higher degree in the more specialized areas of study including engineering, architecture, medicine, and veterinary courses. The resulting degree is similar to a bachelor's degree. For the third stage, students study and undertake research for a minimum of four additional years. A doctor's degree is earned after the submission and defense of a thesis. The equivalent of a master's degree may be earned after 1–2 years of study in the third stage; however, this degree is not officially recognized.

## The Need for Reform

Since the initial framework was established in 1983, the higher education system in Spain has seen significant growth. The number of students enrolled in universities has risen significantly, and the percentage of Spaniards holding a university degree has doubled since the 1980s. According to 2001 statistics, 24 per-

cent of Spaniards in the 25–34 age bracket have attained at least a university education, compared to 18 percent in the same age bracket across all OECD member countries. (“Spain,” p. 81) However, in Spain the concern has not been with the number of people attending universities; rather, it is with the quality of the education that students receive. Considering that human capital formation is one of the key contributors to productivity and consequently GDP growth, the role of the higher education system in the labor market is an important issue. However, unemployment rates are particularly high in Spain for university graduates in the 25 to 34 age bracket — 14.3 percent compared to the European Union average of 6.2 percent in 2000. (“Key Data...”) According to some observers, this is a reflection of weaknesses in the higher education system. (Mora et al., 2000) They contend that the high unemployment rates indicate that graduates are not adequately prepared for the labor market. It has been suggested that the Spanish universities have been slow to respond to shifts in the skill demands of the labor market. A major problem has been that Spain lacks an adequate mechanism to address quality concerns within the system.

One of the main structural weaknesses facing the public university system throughout the past 20 years has been the lack of a comprehensive nationwide system of assessing the quality of university education programs. The lack of such a system has made it nearly impossible to identify areas of weakness and to implement changes to improve university programs. Limited quality assessment did occur in the 1990s; however, it was restricted to universities studying their own programs. Attempts to develop comparative rankings and publish performance indicators across universities have been met with strong opposition from university rectors and governing boards. According to John Hooper in *The New Spaniards*, “No authoritative comparative has ever been drawn up within Spain because, as some university teachers have openly admitted, none of them dares to court the wrath of the academic community.” (Hooper, p. 271) Additionally, from a funding standpoint, public money allocated to universities is not linked to performance. With

the absence of a nationwide measure of quality, together with the independence of funding from performance, there has been little competitive pressure felt by public universities. Typically, public universities have operated independently of each other. This isolationism has also restricted the flow of ideas among institutions. One of the underlying causes of these difficulties has been the rigid power structure within university governing boards.

An additional problem facing the Spanish university system has been excessive “inbreeding” when it comes to university hiring practices. The cultural and social networks that have developed within universities give internal candidates priority over external candidates in the hiring process. According to one estimate, approximately 90 percent of lecturers teach in the very same department where they completed their first degree. (Chislett, p. 52) Though they may be better qualified for a particular position, external candidates often find it especially difficult to obtain a position when competing against a local candidate. An analysis of a 1998 job search at Barcelona Autonomous University serves as an example of this bias. A candidate with twelve articles in various professional journals and who had published a book was turned down for a post in favor of a candidate with only one publication but with nine years’ experience at a local university. (Warden, “Lecturer Fights...”) This problem stems from the disproportionate power that the controlling council within each university possesses. Typically, the hiring boards appointed by the council contain few external members, consisting primarily of university “insiders.” Moreover, the criteria used to make hiring decisions are often unclear and tend to reflect an individual’s contacts within the university rather than merit. The limited transparency in hiring practices allows these boards to give preference to internal candidates, while the lack of mobility of professors across institutions contributes to the isolationism mentioned earlier. Such practices limit the exchange of ideas among institutions, which can in turn hinder the development of quality university programs.

From the student standpoint, incentives for quality improvement are also limited due to

low student mobility. The process of students seeking out the university that offers the best program for a given course of study rarely occurs in Spain. At most Spanish universities, dormitories and other on-campus living facilities are costly and scarce. Furthermore, grants typically cover only enrollment fees and do not help to subsidize living costs. As a result, students tend to live at home and commute to the local university each day. Additionally, the costs of attending a university in Spain are relatively low compared to the rest of the European Union. In Spain, because the cost of a university education is largely subsidized by the national and regional governments, typical tuition costs range from 3–4 thousand euros (approximately \$2,000–3,000) per year. (“Structure of Education...”) Due to these low tuition costs, students may feel less compelled to shop around for the school that offers the best return on investment.

The cost structure also has an impact upon a student’s decision to enter the labor market. It is a common claim in Spain that the university system has been used by some as a shelter from unemployment. (Hooper, p. 270) Part of the problem is that there are few barriers to university admission. Eight out of every ten students successfully complete the *selectividad*, allowing them to enter into a public institution. (Chislett, p. 53) Once a student has been accepted into a university, there is little incentive to rush through their studies. Because of the relatively low cost of a university education, coupled with the low probability of finding a job, staying in school as long as possible is often a much more appealing alternative to entering the workforce. Only 50 percent of students tend to finish their degree on time, with 40–45 percent of students repeating courses. (Chislett, p. 51) Statistics on the average length of study are limited; however, according to a Politécnica de Cataluña study of its own students, the average time taken to complete a three-year degree is just over six years. (Hooper, p. 170) The problem is rooted in the forgiving nature of the system, which allows students to stay on as long as necessary to complete their degree. Obviously, extended lengths of study represent an inefficient use of public funding. Protracted stays at universities result in high-

er costs for the public sector, but do not result in a greater amount of human capital formation. (“Spain,” pp. 88–89)

In general, the output of the higher education system in Spain does not match the demands of the labor market. This is one of the causes of the high unemployment levels among university graduates. A high proportion of graduates are overqualified for the positions they obtain after graduation. For example, a disproportionate number of students meet the minimum *selectividad* score required to pursue a career in one of the more elite fields such as law or medicine. Students who earn that score generally choose to study for a career in that field. Consequently, there has been a surplus of trained lawyers and doctors, but not enough jobs in law or medicine to accommodate them. Highly educated workers who are unable to find work that fits their level of education will often take on a position at a lower skill level, at least temporarily. With a top-heavy labor force of university educated workers, less-educated workers have been crowded out by the more advanced candidates for the same positions. (Dolado et al., pp. 10–11) For many Spaniards, it is not necessary to study at a university; vocational programs that provide more specific occupational training would be more appropriate. Yet, vocational training programs in Spain are underdeveloped. Only 31.2 percent of secondary students opt for vocational training courses. Compared to the OECD average of 47 percent, Spain is lagging behind in this field. (“Spain,” p. 86) Channeling more students into vocational programs is necessary to better balance the output from universities with the needs of the labor market.

In addition to labor market concerns, there are other structural weaknesses that face the public university system. For example, the current cost structure of the university system has raised concerns regarding access to public university programs for students from lower-class households. Public funds are appropriated to each university by the national government as a lump sum. The use and distribution of these funds are dictated by the governing council within each university. These funds are typically used to drive down the cost of tuition for all students. However, use of government

funds to offset tuition costs for all students comes at the expense of grants and aid to lower-income households. Despite the relatively low tuition costs, paying for a university education is still not feasible for many of these low income families without additional aid. The main criticism has been that a regressive system has developed, one that provides greater benefit to middle-to-upper-class students. With limited aid available, the current cost structure excludes many students with lower incomes. In 2000, it was estimated that students from upper-class backgrounds were five times more likely to attend a university as those from lower-class backgrounds. (Warden, "Spanish Access ...")

## Changes to the System

For 18 years following the enactment of the LRU in 1983, the overall structure of the Spanish public university system had remained relatively unchanged. As the 21st century arrived, however, two significant events marked the start of a transitional period for the system. At a meeting of 29 European countries in 1999, the Bologna Declaration was passed in an effort to standardize university education across Europe. With the goal of creating a uniform "European Area for Higher Education," education ministers representing 29 countries proposed a series of goals that each country's national higher education policy should aim to meet by 2010. The goals include:

1. Adopting a system of two standard degree cycles, undergraduate and graduate;
2. Establishing a uniform system of credits;
3. Facilitating student mobility throughout member countries;
4. Launching cooperation initiatives to develop common curricula and methodologies.

Achieving the goals set forth by the declaration has been the main driving force behind changes to the public university system in Spain; and in 2000 the Spanish government proposed a series of comprehensive reforms that eventually took the form of the 2001 Ley Organica de Universidades (Organic Law of Universities — LOU).

The original objective of the LOU was to implement changes that would move the Spanish higher education system into compliance with the Bologna Declaration. Provisions of the law included a restructuring of the degree program according to the guidelines of the Bologna Declaration and the adoption of a "diploma supplement," which contains detailed information about the degree holder's training and credentials. The diploma supplement is expected to facilitate mobility of graduates and enhance employment opportunities throughout member countries. The details of the supplement will give employers a greater understanding of the educational history of a potential employee.

In addition to meeting the goals of the Bologna Declaration through the LOU, the government also attempted to address some of the structural issues discussed earlier. The LOU established the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation, commonly referred to by the acronym ANECA (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación). As noted earlier, although assessment of institutional quality occurred throughout the 1990s, it was limited to individual universities. The creation of the agency will attempt to institutionalize these efforts. The new agency will address four main areas: the assessment of academics, the evaluation of a university's own quality assessment programs, the certification of quality, and the accreditation process.

Additionally, in response to the concerns regarding public university hiring practices, the law called for a major shift in the governing of public universities. As one of the more significant reforms, the LOU called for the restructuring of university governing boards to include a larger proportion of outside representatives. Furthermore, teachers who wished to be considered for a position at a public university would first have to take a national test. Based upon the results of this "habilitation exam," teachers would first be ranked and then entered into a pool from which universities will make their selection. In public universities, the number of tenured positions will be reduced to a maximum of 50 percent, down significantly from the previous level of 70 percent. Still other



structural changes include the elimination of the *selectividad* exam by 2004.

## Criticisms of the Reforms

Upon its introduction in 2001, the LOU was met with mixed reactions from the public. The reforms aimed at meeting the goals of the Bologna Declaration were welcomed; however, attempts to reform the university governance were met with considerable opposition by university rectors, teachers, and students. Holding an absolute majority in congress, the Popular Party (PP) had been able to introduce the law after only limited discussion with university leaders. Hundreds of thousands from the academic community took to the streets of Madrid in 2001 to protest what they believed was an attempt to weaken the constitutionally guaranteed university autonomy. However, these protests were largely political in nature in that they were more concerned with the threat to their power to make decisions. They were much less concerned with the future of the university system. Nevertheless, the outpouring of criticism from the academic community led the government to scale back the reforms package. The law had originally called for one-third representation from members outside the university on public university governing boards. However, after the confrontation with the academic community, that number was significantly reduced. On boards that approach up to 50 members, only three outside members on the governing board would be required.

The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), one of Spain's main political parties, has been one of the strongest opponents of the provisions of the LOU. In March 2004 the PSOE, led by Prime Minister Zapatero, came into power after unexpectedly defeating the PP in the national elections. The change in government has put the 2001 reforms in even greater jeopardy. Almost immediately following the election, the new government announced that it planned to repeal several key elements of the LOU. The habilitation exam for potential lecturers has been replaced with a national system of accreditation. Furthermore, the suspension of the *selectividad*, which was scheduled for the fall of 2004, has been post-

poned. Overall, the new government seems to be committed to restoring the power to universities that was taken away by the LOU and, as of spring 2005, is in the process of drafting a new reforms package to officially replace the LOU. With the new reforms package, there are several structural issues that must be addressed to facilitate continued improvements in quality and efficiency. Several of these issues are discussed in the next section.

## Further University Reform Needs

The reforms initially introduced with the LOU can be regarded as a first step toward improving the quality and efficiency of the public university system in Spain. The most significant reform introduced by the LOU was the creation of ANECA, the quality assessment agency. Identification of areas of weakness has been a considerable challenge to improving the quality of university programs. Previously, any publication of university performance had been rare. By institutionalizing this process through ANECA, there will be greater transparency of performance indicators. This is expected to make the public university system more competitive and spark incentives for improvement. However, there is still further room for improving quality assessment in Spain. Of the four areas that ANECA evaluates, only the accreditation process is compulsory. The three remaining areas — assessment of academics, evaluation of a university's own quality assessment programs, and certification of quality — are still voluntary. Additionally, though the agency will collect a considerable amount of information, this information will not be used to publish any form of comparative rankings of the public universities in Spain.

The absence of a comprehensive ranking of universities can be linked to the lack of a competitive environment among the Spanish public universities. Establishment of such a system would work to improve quality on two levels. From a funding standpoint, linking relative performance to government funding would compel each institution to expand upon its own internal quality assessment and improvement measures. Furthermore, a nationwide ranking of each institution would allow students to seek

out the best programs to fit their educational needs. Currently, as noted earlier, most students attend the local university in their home region. The possibility of losing students is an added incentive for university leaders to place greater emphasis upon improving institutional quality.

## University Governance Reforms

Despite some changes for the better, the LOU still did not go far enough to address a critical problem facing the public university system, the rigid power structure that dominates many public universities. The current system tends to give preferential treatment in hiring to internal candidates and is a considerable obstacle to improvements in institutional quality. These hiring practices are often blind to a candidate's merits and qualifications. In the end, it is the students who are most adversely impacted because they are not receiving instruction from the best available lecturers. Reforming hiring practices is an important step toward improving the overall quality of education in Spain. The measures introduced by the LOU were not embraced by the academic community, as I noted earlier. But this was not because of opposition to the idea itself, but rather because of opposition to the process by which the measures were drafted. The government's attempt to reform university governance with very little input from university rectors was viewed as a challenge to university autonomy. Future reforms will require a joint effort between the government and university leaders to develop a solution to this problem.

## Structural Changes

One of the major criticisms of the existing public university system is that it does not fit the labor needs of society. According to Gustavo Villapolos, the Rector of the Complutense University in Madrid, universities should be "for training elites and not the masses" (as quoted in Hooper, p. 270). Recently, the PSOE announced the postponement of the suspension of the *selectividad*. The PSOE holds the view that such an exam is a necessity because successful completion of the exam guarantees

access to public university programs for a large portion of the population. However, the opposing view is that the end of the national selection exam is necessary to allow individual institutions to establish their own criteria for admissions. Ideally, the selection process would then become more competitive, limiting enrollment into certain university programs. Contrary to beliefs within the PSOE, the effect of such a change would not be to reduce the number of those who attend a public university; rather, it would serve to channel more people into vocational and technical schools. This would in turn help to bring about a better distribution of students that best fits the needs of the labor market. As it stands now, much of the time spent in universities by the 20 to 25-year-old segment of the population is wasted, as there are not enough jobs for university graduates.

In addition to addressing the role of the public university system in the labor market, reforming the cost structure of public universities is necessary. As noted earlier, the current cost structure has led to the use of universities as a shield against unemployment. Students often choose to enter into university study because there is such a low opportunity cost. Students also are not compelled to finish on time because the cost to remain in school for an additional year or two is low. One solution that can potentially eliminate both of these problems is a rise in tuition costs. A rise in tuition costs would help to initially divert more students away from universities and into the cheaper vocational programs. Additionally, higher tuition costs would provide students with a much greater incentive to complete their studies on time and enter into the labor force. A rise in tuition costs would also help to alleviate the regressive pricing system for universities that tends to exclude students from lower-income families. As discussed earlier, under the current system much of the costs of education are offset with public funds. However, most of these funds are used to directly drive down tuition costs for all students. This has driven the tuition costs well below the price that students from higher income families would be willing to pay, yet still remain beyond the reach of many poorer families. By channeling a large-



er proportion of the government funds into financial aid programs through a rise in tuition costs, a university education would be much more accessible to students coming from lower-income backgrounds.

## Conclusions

Since the initial groundwork for the public university system in Spain was laid in 1983, great progress has been made to turn Spain into a more educated society. The proportion of those who now hold a post-secondary degree has skyrocketed. However, further changes are necessary to enable the system to reach its full potential. It is not a question of the number of people who have post-secondary training; rather, there is a need to better match this

training to the needs of society. Higher tuition costs will induce greater personal investment in a degree, compelling students to finish on time and funneling more students into vocational programs. These higher tuition costs can also help to alleviate equity concerns by increasing funding to financial aid programs. Additionally, there is significant potential for improving the quality of educational programs at universities. Furthermore, greater publication of performance indicators through ANECA will provide greater incentives for Spanish universities to improve quality as students will be able to seek out the best programs. Overall, a strong base for public university in Spain exists, but further reforms can help Spain reach its untapped potential.

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